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ABSTRACT

This report describes the first year activities of the Project on the Implementation of General Education. The research examines how general education programs are actually developed and implemented on college campuses that have limited resources, specifically focusing on comprehensive doctorate-granting institutions in New England. It is noted that when a change process is initiated, usually at the insistence of an administrator, it takes an average of over 3 years to complete. Several variables are described that appear to contribute to the successful design and implementation of general education curricula on college campuses. They include the need to obtain initial agreement about the reasons for change early in the design process and the critical role that faculty development activities and extrinsic rewards for involvement play long after the changes are implemented. Results from two case studies and site visits are discussed. These studies show that in each of the situations examined, the success of the process depended upon the ability of campus leaders to acknowledge the tensions in the process and to develop mechanisms that could mediate the differences that arose. Contains eight references. (GLR)

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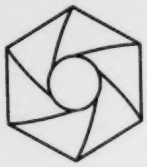

New England Resource Center *for* Higher Education

Working Paper #5

The Implementation of General Education: Some Early Findings

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Abstract

The article reports on the first year activities of the Project on the Implementation of General Education. The project, conducted by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, is funded by the Exxon Education Foundation. The research examines how general education programs are actually developed and implemented on college campuses that have limited resources.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION: SOME EARLY FINDINGS

The Problem

During the 1980's 75% of the colleges and universities in the country changed their general education requirements: students today are being held to more rigorous standards for graduation, the curriculum structure is tighter, and there is greater emphasis on writing, foreign languages, critical thinking, and the integration of knowledge (El-Khawas, 1988; Gaff, 1989). Our study focuses on how new general education curricula are actually developed and implemented on non-elite campuses that have limited resources. More specifically, using the Carnegie Foundation classification, we are examining the process of curriculum change in three types of colleges: comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions, liberal arts II colleges, and community colleges.1

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1 Comprehensive colleges and universities I and II are defined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1987) as institutions that award more than half of their degrees in two or more professional areas, in addition to awarding some masters degrees. Doctorate-granting universities I and II are defined as institutions that award at least ten or more Ph.D.'s in at least three disciplines or at least ten Ph.D.'s in at least one discipline. Liberal Arts Colleges II are defined as "primarily undergraduate colleges that are less selective [than the highly selective schools in the Liberal Arts I category], and award more than half their degrees in liberal arts fields. This category also includes a group of colleges.... that award less than half of their degrees in liberal arts fields but, with fewer than 1,500 students, are too small to be

Learning about curriculum change in these institutions is particularly important. When taken together they enroll the vast majority of students in higher education, many of whom are the first in their families to attend college. Furthermore, a substantial number of their students (whether first generation or not) enter with serious deficiencies in both basic skills and general education. Yet in the past decade many of these institutions have raised academic standards for their students, and, with limited budgets, have worked hard at improving general education. These schools also typically make greater routine demands on their faculty. Indeed, heavy teaching, committee, and administrative loads, combined with fewer resources for research, make life in them hard on faculty. Thus, it is very likely that these institutions will find the process of changing their general education curricula especially difficult.

Given these circumstances, we wish to learn what distinguishes campuses that have successfully adopted new general education curricula from those that have not. We are asking which change strategies work and why, and which neglect or mishandle the curriculum change process. It is our hope that knowledge about the curriculum change process can help similar institutions realize the aspirations they have for themselves and

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considered comprehensive." Community colleges are defined as institutions that offer certificate or degree programs through the Associate of Arts level and, with few exceptions, offer no baccalaureate degrees.

their students, and in the process foster reform and experiment in American higher education.

Study Design

A new general education curriculum cannot be understood without carefully considering all the elements that give it life--the cast of characters, campus values and collective arrangements, the joining of events and circumstances (both local and national), and the courses themselves. We are examining not just the formal adoption and implementation of new programs, but also how the culture of the institution finds expression in the curriculum change process. On campuses where the results of the change process fall short of initial expectations (in other words, the compromises and decisions that result in didn't-quite-make-it programs) there is still much to be learned through comparative analysis about the conditions that foster successful curriculum change.

We began with a telephone survey designed (1) to assess changes in general education in comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions in New England, and (2) to identify the comprehensive and doctorate-granting colleges and universities whose experiences we would examine in detailed case studies. Senior academic officers, or someone they designated as particularly knowledgeable, were asked when they last revised their general education requirements, how long it took them to do

so, how extensive the changes were, the numbers and positions of people involved in the change process, and whether any additional resources were utilized (e.g., release time, consultants, travel, grants) for both the planning and implementation stages.

On the basis of the survey results, 4 institutions were selected for intensive study. Criteria for inclusion were (1) that the change in the institution's general education program was substantial, requiring new courses, new positions, or new administrative structures, (2) that the new program had been in place for at least five years, so that the history of its implementation could be analyzed, and (3) that the institution's selection would contribute to the mix of public and private institutions with medium to large sized enrollments that were needed for our sample.

The site visits were conducted over two days by teams of two or three people, and consisted of in-depth interviews with administrators, faculty, and staff identified as being active in the planning and implementation of the new general education program. Opponents of the change were also interviewed. The interviews lasted about 90 minutes, and consisted of clusters of questions concerning the background of the interviewees (e.g., their career path and current involvement in the general education program); the impetus for change; how the various individuals and committees went about their business; points of agreement and contention, support and opposition; the role of

governance; faculty and administrative leadership; and, of course, implementation.

We were particularly interested in the implementation of the curriculum and paid attention to when implementation was first discussed, who decided who would teach in the program, the nature of any incentives for faculty participation, the role of academic departments, the extent to which financial and non-financial resources were allocated, the fate of any faculty development efforts, and the extent to which the new curriculum was thought successful. Interviewers were also encouraged to pursue leads idiosyncratic to time and place, so that the design and implementation of the new general education program could be captured in richness and detail.

We are currently following a similar process for the Liberal Arts Colleges II in New England. The telephone survey has been completed and, at this writing, five institutions are being considered for site visits.

We did not begin with a tabula rasa. We knew from previous studies that careful attention to the process of implementation is crucial, and that in its absence even otherwise sensible plans can founder (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Pfeffer, 1978; Chickering, et al., 1977). More specifically, it is not enough for a curriculum committee or other faculty body to propose a new general education program; it is also necessary to plan how it

will become viable within the context of a particular campus culture.

Drawing on this existing work on organizations, one of us, Zelda Gamson, identified five "R's" that were hypothesized to enhance the likelihood of institutionalizing curricular change, and which helped shape our questions:

*rewarding those responsible for the development and implementation of a general education program through recognition, workload adjustments, release time, promotion, and monetary rewards (Chickering, et al., 1977).

*restructuring administrative and budgetary processes to plan, coordinate, monitor, and assess general education. Examples of re-structuring include appointing a new "czar" for general education, incorporating responsibility for general education into the office of a senior administrator, and establishing a special committee(s) to monitor general education (Gaff, 1983; Gamson, 1984).

*retraining current and new faculty so they understand and can participate in a general education program. Examples range from workshops, retreats, release time to master new materials and teaching techniques,

collaborative course development, and ongoing faculty seminars (Chickering et al., 1977; Gaff 1983; Association of American Colleges, 1988).

*recruiting appropriate faculty to teach in the new general education program, both from within the institution and from the outside. Examples include recruiting practitioners, interdisciplinary faculty, and faculty representing cultures and backgrounds that may be called for in the new program (Gamson, 1984; Association of American Colleges, 1988).

*resources needed for each of the other R's. Here, leadership from the top and the creation of a climate of belief in and support for general education are crucial (Gaff, 1983; Gamson, 1984; Chickering, et al., 1977).

During the site visits we tried to learn if these five R's were important, and, if so, in which ways and to what extent, all the while keeping on the lookout for factors not originally anticipated. While it is too early in our research to be definitive about these five R's, some related preliminary findings can be presented.

Some Findings From the Telephone Survey

Seventy three percent of the comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions in New England had changed their general education curricula since 1980, comparable to the percentage of comprehensive and doctoral universities that had made changes at the national level (American Council on Education, 1988). Of the remaining 27 percent, 19 percent had not modified their general educational curricula since the 1970's, and 8 percent not since the 1960's. The degree of change ranged from adding one requirement (usually in writing or mathematics) to overhauling or replacing the general education curriculum.

Prior to the curricular change, 40 percent had a general education curriculum which consisted of distribution requirements selected by students from a wide array of courses or general areas (a "distribution system"), and 47 percent had a distribution system with some required courses (a "modified distribution system"). Three percent of the institutions had mostly prescribed courses for all students that allowed for some free choice (a "modified core") and 10 percent had no general education curriculum at all.

Thirty-three percent of the colleges and universities that started with a distribution system stayed with the same system, 42 percent moved to a modified distribution core and 25 percent adopted a modified core. Only 20 percent of the institutions

that started with a modified distribution system elected to alter the form of their general education curriculum and they all adopted a modified core. The few institutions that began with no general education curriculum usually implemented a modified distribution system.

The change process itself, from the first formal deliberations to implementation, averaged three and one half years, with curriculum committees spending anywhere from 200 to 3000 person hours in the effort. In 69 percent of the cases, academic officers were identified as being the person or part of a group of people who started the process moving. Presidents and faculty were catalysts for change in 44 per cent of the institutions.

The committee responsible for formulating the revision was composed entirely or mostly of faculty (95 percent), with committee members most likely to be appointed by an academic officer (43 percent) or through faculty governance (16 percent). Final approval authority rested with the faculty or faculty governing body (53 percent) or with the President (29 percent). The academic officer of the institution had final authority in 8 percent of the institutions.

A majority of the comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions reported devoting resources to implement their general education curriculum, usually in the form of released time or grant money for faculty members to create new general

education courses (68 percent). New faculty were hired in 35 percent of the institutions and funds were dispersed to retrain faculty in teaching methods in 32 percent of the colleges and universities.

Most institutions (68 percent) have faculty committees in place to oversee changes in their general education curriculum. The responsibility is evenly divided between specially appointed general education committees (35 percent) and standing faculty governance committees (33 percent).

Some Findings From the Site Visits

By the end of the site visits to four comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions, it became increasingly apparent why some curriculum change processes succeeded more than others. Our discussion is illustrated by the experiences of two of these campuses, one of which successfully implemented a new general education program, the other of which did not. Following the work of Munson and Pelz (1982), we have divided the change process into three stages: diagnosis, design and implementation. (In actuality these stages are not always sequential: people may be thinking about implementation practices durng the design stage, redesign may follow implementation, and so on.) Before presenting some of our findings, however, a brief description of each institution is required. Identifying information has been altered to preserve confidentiality.

Alpha University is a private, urban university located in the Northeast. It has an enrollment of 5000 students, almost half of them part-time. Organized into four colleges, three providing professional education, the university offers both bachelors and masters degrees. However, by the early 1980's competition from near-by universities had reduced undergraduate enrollments, and, with a limited endowment, Alpha was forced to pare its budget dramatically. In addition, an ever increasing majority of students were majoring in one of the professional fields, leaving the liberal arts college, once considered the crown jewel of the university, with many faculty but few students. From the administration's point of view, there were simply too many under-subscribed liberal arts classes. With the exception of a required freshman writing course, Alpha University had no general education requirement.

Beta is a public college located in a small town in the Northeast. Established in the early nineteen hundreds as a teacher's college, Beta has a full-time enrollment of 3500 students and offers bachelors and master's programs in the liberal arts, business and teaching. It has 12 departments. Enrollments at the college are healthy. Until 1986, Beta College had a modified general education program that consisted of 12 required credit hours in the humanities, sciences and math. Students could fulfill the requirements by taking any course in each of these areas.

Diagnosis Stage. The experiences of each school dramatize how critical it is that there be initial agreement about the reasons for changing the general education curriculum. At Alpha University the initial impetus for change came from the President of the University. He told faculty and student groups that he had but one motive for wanting the university to institute a core curriculum: the need to give students a broad education so that they could become informed world citizens. To his staff, the President admitted to another goal: that the core be more cost-efficient than the present system which permitted liberal arts departments to offer whatever they wanted. He wanted a core which limited students' course options to a small number of required courses. Such a design would reduce the number of liberal arts courses offered each semester, allow for an increase in class sizes, and require fewer liberal arts faculty.

Many faculty agreed with the President that the university needed to institute general education requirements in order to improve the quality of students' education. The liberal arts faculty, more enthusiastic about the possibility of change than the professional faculties, were hopeful that the President's message signalled the revitalization of the liberal arts college. Before long, however, word spread about the President's private agenda. Reacting with cynicism and anger, the liberal arts faculty treated future proceedings as a political process in which the most important objective was to gain job security. The

battle was joined, with each side willing to exploit the design of the general education curriculum to achieve its ends. As shall be seen, the legacy of holding the new curriculum hostage would reverberate through the coming decade.

At Beta College, by contrast, the reasons for change were unadulterated and clear. Faculty and administrative dissatisfaction with the general education program had been smoldering for years in the growing belief that it lacked both breadth and depth. The momentum for change increased when an accreditation team recommended that the college review its general education curriculum. While there was some confusion about whether the administration told the faculty not to worry about costs when designing the curriculum, everyone agreed that there was only one agenda on the table: to improve the general education curriculum at Beta College.

The lesson here, as confirmed by experiences on other campuses we visited, is that curriculum change is impeded and even jeopardized when there are contradictory motives or hidden agendas. People are quick to sense when the process has become contaminated, and distrust and undue conflict soon follow. Some conflict, of course, is inevitable. This is, in part, because administrators are more pressed by the diurnal practical concerns of running an institution, while faculty tend to be more concerned with the curriculum as an expression of deeply held beliefs about the value and goodness of what they do.

(Undoubtedly, this has much to do with the extraordinary hours of work by faculty curriculum committees, as well as with the passion with which faculty often spoke in the interviews.) The curriculum, in short, is a powerful symbol for faculty, a point recognized but downplayed by many more practically minded administrators. For these reasons, faculty are reluctant to share their "ownership' over the curriculum with administrators unless the goals of the process are public and mutually acceptable.

Design Stage. From the point of view of our study, we had the good fortune of visiting campuses experiencing one or more substantial changes: new leadership, a decline in enrollment, a decline in revenues, a shift in the regional economy, or a critical accreditation review. While these periods of institutional uncertainty often help bring about calls for redesigning the curriculum, we found that faculty in this situation are not risk-takers. They are unlikely to support any efforts to change the curriculum unless key academic leaders provide a vision for change that is in their interest.

At Alpha University, economic uncertainty provided the background for change. Once the President decided to initiate change, the administrative leadership began working quietly behind the scenes to influence the proposals emanating from various faculty interest groups. For example, the liberal arts faculty wanted a core curriculum large enough in required credit

hours to save their jobs, while the faculty in the professional schools wanted the general education curriculum to serve the needs of a professional education. Fearing that no one group had much power in the change process, and distrustful of the administration's goals, a number of faculty decided that it was in their best interest to resist efforts to make major changes in the general education curriculum.

One of the critical ingredients of a successful design process is the ability of campus leaders to anticipate conflicts and provide a means for their resolution. Because significant curriculum change often involves a reallocation of power and resources (and can sometimes alter an institution's mission), a campus in the design stage is typically buzzing with arguments for and against competing proposals. Our site visits indicate that, no matter what the level of uncertainty on a campus, the faculty feel quite vulnerable during this stage of curriculum change and the process of mediating differences should be done by clearly identifiable faculty leaders rather than the President or academic officer.

In our two examples, the chief academic officer on each campus began the design process by appointing an ad hoc committee and charging it with fashioning a general education curriculum acceptable to the faculty. At Alpha College, the Provost appointed a large committee of 35 faculty, staff and students, which, according to the participants, made it unwieldy.

At Beta College, the faculty chair of the College Curriculum Committee began the process by requesting that the Dean organize a general education task force. She agreed and selected 12 faculty members from a list of senior faculty recommended by the College Curriculum Committee. The decision making process as well as the selections were well-received by the faculty.

Both committees worked diligently to communicate with the faculty and respond to their concerns. At Alpha University, the committee chose to distribute its major recommendations to the faculty as they developed during the process so that the faculty in each of the colleges could take a non-binding vote to indicate support or non-support. After making many compromises designed to win faculty support, the committee chose to adopt the President's preferred design and recommended a core curriculum that had a limited number of required interdisciplinary courses. Fearing that fewer faculty would be needed if this plan were adopted -- and that the "excess" would lose their jobs -- the liberal arts faculty vigorously opposed the proposal. The Faculty Senate, whose approval was required for enactment, responded to the concerns of the liberal arts faculty by substituting a modified distribution system in place of the core program. Although this was acceptable to the faculty and was adopted by the university, the President was deeply disappointed.

At Beta College, the committee began by distributing a survey to faculty that asked how the general education curriculum

should be changed. The committee also published a newsletter and organized a series of workshops to inform the community about its progress and to get further feedback. In this manner, Beta College's committee consistently resolved differences among the faculty and between the faculty and administration. Their final recommendation had five major parts: 1) demonstration of skills in English, math and computer use; 2) required introductory courses which provide perspectives or approaches to studying the world; 3) an upper level integrative seminar; 4) an upper level writing course and 5) required advanced work in general education. In a college-wide faculty binding referendum, the faculty overwhelmingly voted to support the committee's general education proposal.

Implementation Stage. No matter how carefully a proposal is designed, unforeseen problems arise during its implementation. As a general rule, the more ambitious the design the more likely adjustments will have to be made during the initial stages of implementation. We found that it is particularly important for faculty to oversee the implementation and adjustment process, both to sustain a sense of "ownership" and commitment, and because it is the faculty who are most familiar with the effects of implementation decisions.

Both Alpha University and Beta College created monitoring committees to guide the implementation of the new general education programs. At Alpha University, the Provost decided

that the monitoring committee should represent the different colleges rather than the faculty at large or the faculty who taught in the core. Of the thirty-five faculty, students and administrators on the committee appointed by the Provost over the ten years of its existence, only a handful have ever had experience teaching in the core. Sensitive to the institution's shaky economic status, and fearful that any but the most mundane administrative changes could threaten the status quo even more, the committee has been paralyzed in action, if not in imagination. Except for a decision to eliminate a minor writing requirement, the committee has made no changes in the general education program.

At Beta College, the monitoring committee is composed of the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, 2 students (who never attend), 1 faculty member from the Curriculum Committee and 4 faculty elected at large. The faculty have just voted to expand the committee to include 2 additional at-large faculty. The committee meets regularly and has approved a number of new general education courses as well as made several policy changes, including revising the science requirements.

Our site visits suggest other helpful implementation strategies. For example, institutions contemplating a major change in their general education curriculum have benefitted from first testing it on a small scale. Relatively inexpensive pilot projects, such as developing a small number of core courses, have

helped colleges and universities to eliminate unforeseen problems, and even to decide whether to proceed with a broad implementation. Although not a common practice -- neither Alpha University nor Beta College tried testing out their proposals-- institutions may want to consider it when planning major changes in curriculum.

Of course, a new general education curriculum can be defeated in many ways, even after implementation. It can be rejected and sabotaged by passive resistance (for example, too few volunteers to teach required core courses), by festering conflict among those implementing the curriculum, by a change in key campus leaders, or by a change in internal or external conditions. Indeed, throughout its ten years of implementation, Alpha University's core has been in trouble. Seen as a political compromise that sacrificed substance in order to save jobs, the core has never received adequate financial support from the administration. Recent replacements for the President and Provost profess support for the core, but it is lukewarm at best and not evidenced by deed. Without faculty development activities or extrinsic rewards for involvement, faculty members have been reluctant to teach core courses. Those who do teach in the core see it as a way to guarantee seats and preserve jobs, rather than as a means to improve the quality of students' education.

At Beta College, by contrast, the design and implementation process contributed to the resolution of most people's concerns about the curriculum, so that a fairly wide consensus was achieved. The faculty and administrative leadership have remained committed to keeping the academic community actively involved and excited about the general education curriculum. The college has sponsored workshops on issues related to the curriculum, provided funds for travel to general education conferences and for the development of new courses, supported the publication of a journal on writing across the curriculum, and provided clerical and administrative support for the general education committee. Not surprisingly, four years after implementation, faculty and administrative support for the general education program at Beta College remains strong.

Discussion

We have reported on the first year activities of the Project on the Implementation of General Education funded by the Exxon Education Foundation. The focus of research was comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions in New England.

The telephone survey provides evidence that interest in general education is high and that institutions are working hard at improving their general education curriculum. When changes are made, comprehensive and doctorate-granting institutions elect to stay with the same design ("distribution," "modified

distribution," or "modified core") or move to a system that is more prescriptive. The process takes time--on average, over three years. While the catalyst for change is often an administrator, faculty continue to have primary responsibility for the design of the curriculum.

Based upon the first year of site visits, we have described several variables that appear to contribute to the successful design and implementation of general education curriculum on college campuses. They include the need to obtain initial agreement about the reasons for change early in the design process and the critical role that faculty development activities and extrinsic rewards for involvement play long after the changes are implemented.

What impressed us most in the two case studies (as well as in the other two site visits) is the importance of dealing with conflict in the curriculum change process. In each of the situations, the success of the process depended upon the ability of campus leaders to acknowledge the tensions in the process and to develop mechanisms that could mediate the differences that arose.

We end our discussion on a cautionary note. This essay is a status report on but a few initial findings in the first year of a three year project. While our results are already rich with

possibilities, our conclusions must remain tentative--working hypotheses for the future.2

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2 We wish to thank our past and present colleagues, Linda Eisenmann, Daphne Layton, Bob Ross and Jana Nidifer, for making this article possible.

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